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PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

*“For they are My servants, whom I have taken out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold in the manner of a slave.”
(25:42)*

Behar

While the murder of George Floyd has brought about a racial reckoning in the United States of America, that's a very different thing from saying it has brought about racial reconciliation. African-Americans will see justice in this verdict, but so many are looking for fairness and equality in all the aspects of their lives. Fairness and equality must begin with humility and respect.

Some nineteen hundred years ago, twenty-four thousand pupils of Rabbi Akiva died because they did not give each other sufficient respect. Clearly, our work as Jews in the time of the Omer is to increase our respect for others. But that is easier said than done. The truth is it is much easier to see flaws in other people than in ourselves. What we see in others as stingy, we see in ourselves as careful. Where others seem to us loud and brash, we are exuberant.

Here is an idea that helped me: Try and catch other people doing good things. I do not mean rushing into burning buildings to rescue people or facing down a terrorist who is carrying a loaded gun. I am not talking about heroism. Just noticing how nice people are. I remember seeing someone

driving a car down the street and he was just about to run over a child's toy. He stopped the car, got out, and put the toy by the side of the road. He did not have to do that. It was just a nice thing to do.

I will give you another example. I live in an area where there are lots of children. When the kids take out the garbage, they often do not have enough strength to heft the trash into the bin and it gets left by the side of the dumpster – much to the delight of the neighborhood cats. I often see someone picking up the trash and putting it into the bin. That person is not going to get a medal for that. It is just a nice thing to do. Try and catch someone doing something right once a day until the end of the Omer on Shavuot, and you will start to think, “You know, people are really quite nice. Maybe they are as nice as me.” And once I can admit that other people could be as nice as me, maybe I might start to think they could actually be nicer than me – and that's the beginning of humility. And that's the source of respect for others.

TALMUD TIPS

by Rabbi Moshe Newman

Yoma 30-36

No Excuses

We are taught in a beraita: An impoverished person, a rich person and a wicked person came for judgment (in front of the Heavenly Tribunal). The impoverished one was asked, "Why did you not involve yourself with Torah study?" If he answers, "Because I was poor and was busy trying to make a living," the Heavenly Tribunal will say to him: "Were you any poorer than Hillel (the great Sage)!?"

Poverty is no excuse for not sufficiently dedicating one's time and energy to Torah study and mitzvah observance. As the Rambam writes, "Every Jewish man is obligated to study Torah, whether he is poor or rich, whether his body is healthy and whole or afflicted by difficulties, whether he is young or an old man whose strength has diminished. Even if he is a *poor* man who derives his livelihood from charity and begs from door to door, even if he is a husband and a father of children, he must establish a fixed time for Torah study during the day and at night, as the verse states, "You shall dwell on it (the Torah) day and night." (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Talmud Torah 1:8. He addresses a woman's reward for Torah study in 1:13.)

My revered teacher, Rav Moshe Shapiro, *zatzal*, pointed out that the Rambam says that "even one who is married with children" has this same obligation, implying that poverty is even less of an "excuse" than one's obligations to a wife and children.

The *gemara* on our *daf* relates an event concerning Hillel Hazaken, which illustrates how even extreme poverty is not an excuse for not learning Torah. Hillel would work each weekday, and receive a certain coin as payment. He worked only enough for his needs for the day. From the one coin he earned, he would use half of it to support his family and use the other half to pay the guard at the entrance of the Beit Midrash to gain entrance to the Beit Midrash of the great Sages Shemaya and Avtalyon. It once happened that it was *erev* Shabbat, and he had not succeeded in earning enough money to pay the fee to the guard for admission to the Beit Midrash for Shabbat. He was denied entry. Nevertheless, Hillel was determined to learn Torah and prior to Shabbat's start he ascended to the roof of the Beit Midrash. From his special vantage point on the skylight above, he was able to see and hear the transcendent words of Torah that emanated from the Sages inside.

However, it was in the middle of winter, an extremely cold night, and snow descended upon him throughout the night. When morning arrived, Shemaya and Avtalyon wondered why the Beit Midrash was darker than usual. They looked up and saw a human form covering the skylight. They dug the person out from under some six feet of snow, warmed him up and treated his frosty condition as required. Their actions involved desecrating the laws of Shabbat, but in this case it was a mitzvah to do so to save his life. When they saw who he was, they said, "Hillel is most certainly worthy that we should desecrate Shabbat for him!" Hillel's unbridled dedication to Torah study despite his extreme poverty is taught by the Heavenly Tribunal as a refutation to anyone who is poor and thinks he can blame his sub-par Torah study habits on his poverty.

The commentaries wonder about a specific detail of this story: Why in the world was there a guard at the entrance of the Beit Midrash? Until recent years, due to modern security needs of Synagogues and Yeshivas, who recalls a guard at the entrances of places of prayer and Torah study?

The mystery of the guard's presence is addressed by the Maharsha. One reason for the guard's presence, he suggests, was indeed for security. It was the custom in those days to build a Beit Midrash out in the field, outside of the city, which reduced distractions. Therefore, a security detail was required at the entrance of the Beit Midrash to ensure safety and prevent break-ins.

Another need for a guard, writes the Maharsha, is based on a historical change in general yeshiva admission policy. In the time period of this story about Hillel, permission to learn in a yeshiva was restricted, in accordance with the rule established by Rabban Gamliel: "Only a student whose 'interior' was like his 'exterior' would be admitted." This means that only a student who had been certified as sincere in his pursuit of Torah wisdom was deemed a fitting yeshiva candidate to be allowed entrance to the Beit Hamidrash. Therefore, it was necessary to hire a guard to deny entrance to people who were deemed as not passing this sincerity and integrity test. It was not until later, when Rabbi Alazar ben Azaria became the Rosh HaYeshiva, that this policy was amended to allow entrance to *anyone* who would come to learn Torah. This change in policy eliminated the need for posting a guard at the entrance to the Beit Hamidrash. (Mesechet Berachot 28a)

● Yoma 35b

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for ruling.

Questions - Behar

1. Why does the Torah specify that the laws of Shemitta were taught on Har Sinai?
2. If one possesses Shemitta food after it is no longer available in the field, what must he do with it?
3. The Torah commands, "You shall sanctify the fiftieth year." How is this done?
4. Which two "returns" are announced by the shofar during Yovel?
5. From where does the Yovel year get its name?
6. What prohibitions are derived from the verse "v'lo tonu ish et amito" - a person shall not afflict his fellow?
7. What is the punishment for neglecting the laws of Shemitta?
8. If Shemitta is observed properly, how long is the crop of the sixth year guaranteed to last?
9. After selling an ancestral field, when can one redeem it?
10. Under what circumstance may one sell ancestral land?
11. If a home in a walled city is sold, when can it be redeemed?
12. What does the word "days" mean in this week's Parsha?
13. What is considered a walled city?
14. What is the definition of a "ger toshav"?
15. To what is one who leaves Eretz Yisrael compared?
16. Why does Rashi mention the plague of the firstborn in this week's Parsha?
17. List three prohibitions which demonstrate the dignity with which one must treat a Jewish indentured servant.
18. Who supports the family of the Jewish indentured servant during his years of servitude?
19. If a Jew is sold as a servant to a non-Jew, does he go free after six years?
20. Where is it permitted to prostrate oneself on a stone floor?

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary, unless otherwise stated.

Answers

1. 25:1 - To teach us that just as Shemitta was taught in detail on Har Sinai, so too, all the mitzvot were taught in detail on Har Sinai.
2. 25:7 - Remove it from his property and declare it ownerless.
3. 25:10 - At the beginning of the year the Beit Din declares, "This year is kadosh (sanctified)."
4. 25:10 - The return of the land to its original owner, and the "return" (freedom) of the slave from slavery.
5. 25:10 - From the sounding of the shofar. A ram's horn is called a Yovel.
6. 25:17 - One may not intentionally hurt people's feelings, nor give bad advice while secretly intending to reap benefit.
7. 25:18 - Exile.
8. 25:21,22 - From Nissan of the sixth year until Sukkot of the ninth year.
9. 25:24 - After two years following the sale, until Yovel. At the beginning of Yovel it returns to the family automatically.
10. 25:25 - Only if one becomes impoverished.
11. 25:29 - Only within the first year after the sale. Afterwards, even in Yovel, it does not return.
12. 25:29 - The days of an entire year.
13. 25:29 - A city that has been surrounded by a wall since the time of Yehoshua.
14. 25:35 - A non-Jew who lives in Eretz Yisrael and accepts upon himself not to worship idols.
15. 25:38 - To one who worships idols.
16. 25:38 - The prohibition against taking interest is accompanied by the phrase, "I am the L-rd your G-d who took you out of Egypt." Rashi explains that just as G-d discerned in Egypt between those who were firstborn and those who were not, so too will G-d discern and punish those who lend with interest, pretending they are acting on behalf of others.
17. 25:39-43 -
 1. Do not make him perform humiliating tasks.
 2. Do not sell him publicly.
 3. Do not make him perform unnecessary jobs.
18. 25:41 - His master.
19. 25:54 - No. If he is not redeemed with money, he must wait until the Yovel to go free.
20. 26:1 - In the Mikdash.

Questions - Bechukotai

1. To what do the words "*bechukotai telechu*" (walk in My statutes) refer?
2. When is rain "in its season"?
3. What is the blessing of "*v'achaltem lachmechem l'sova*" (and you shall eat your bread to satisfaction)?
4. What is meant by the verse "and a sword will not pass through your land"?
5. Mathematically, if five Jewish soldiers can defeat 100 enemy soldiers, how many enemy soldiers should 100 Jewish soldiers be able to defeat?
6. How much is "*revava*"?
7. Which "progression" of seven transgressions are taught in Chapter 26, and why in that particular order?
8. What is one benefit which the Jewish People derive from the Land of Israel's state of ruin?
9. What was the duration of the Babylonian exile and why that particular number?
10. How many years did the Jewish People sin in Israel up till the time the northern tribes were exiled?
11. In verse 26:42, the name Yaakov is written with an extra "*vav*." From whom did Yaakov receive this extra letter and why?
12. What positive element is implied by the words "and I will bring them into the land of their enemies"?
13. In verse 26:42, why is the word "remember" not used in connection with the name of Yitzchak?
14. Why does the Torah say in 26:46 "Torot" (plural) and not "Torah" (singular)?
15. What happens when a poor person dedicates the value of a man to the *Beit Hamikdash* and doesn't have sufficient funds to fulfill his vow?
16. If a person says, "The leg of this animal shall be an *olah* offering," the animal is sold and sacrificed as an *olah* offering. What is the status of the money received for the animal?
17. If a person dedicates his ancestral field to the *Beit Hamikdash* and fails to redeem it before *Yovel* what happens to the field?
18. Where must "*ma'aser sheini*" be eaten?
19. When a person redeems "*ma'aser sheini*" what happens to the food? What happens to the redemption money?
20. How does a person tithe his animals?

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary, unless otherwise stated.

Answers

1. 26:3 - Laboring in Torah learning.
2. 26:4 - At times when people are not outside (e.g. Shabbat nights).
3. 26:5 - You will only require a little bread to be completely satisfied.
4. 26:6 - No foreign army will travel through your land on their way to a different country.
5. 26:4 - Two thousand.
6. 26:4 - Ten thousand.
7. 26:14,15 - Not studying Torah, not observing *mitzvot*, rejecting those who observe *mitzvot*, hating Sages, preventing others from observing *mitzvot*, denying that G-d gave the *mitzvot*, denying the existence of G-d. They are listed in this order because each transgression leads to the next.
8. 26:32 - No enemy nation will be able to settle in the Land of Israel.
9. 26:35 - 70 years. Because the Jewish People violated 70 *Shemitta* and *Yovel* years.
10. 26:35 - 390 years.
11. 26:42 - In five places in the Torah, Yaakov's name is written with an extra "*vav*" and in five places the name Eliyahu is missing a "*vav*." Yaakov "took" these *vavs* as a pledge that Eliyahu will one day come and announce the redemption of Yaakov's children.
12. 26:41 - G-d Himself, so to speak, will bring them into their enemies' land. This means that even when the Jews are in exile, G-d will supply them with leaders who inspire them to keep the Torah. This guards the Jews from assimilating into the host culture.
13. 26:42 - Because the image of Yitzchak's ashes (who was prepared to be brought as an offering) upon the altar is always before G-d.
14. 26:46 - To teach that both the Written Torah and the Oral Torah were given to Moshe on Har Sinai.
15. 27:8 - The person whose value was donated goes before the *kohen*, who sets the obligation according to the poor person's ability to pay.
16. 27:9 - The money is "*chullin*," meaning it does not have "holy" status, except for the value of the animal's leg which does have "holy" status.
17. 27:16 - It becomes the property of the *kohanim* who are on rotation at the beginning of *Yovel*.
18. 27:30 - In Jerusalem.
19. 27:31 - The food becomes permissible to him outside of Jerusalem. The redemption money must be brought to Jerusalem and used to purchase food to be eaten there.
20. 27:32 - He passes them through a door individually and he marks every tenth animal with a rod smeared with red dye.

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

Synonyms in the Hebrew Language

by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein

Behar-Bechukotai

Settled Citizens

In this essay we will explore three Hebrew words used to describe somebody who lives in a specific place. Such a person can be variously called a *ger*, *toshav* or *ezrach*. In Modern Hebrew, *ezrach* means “citizen,” *toshav* means “resident (without citizenship),” and verb cognates of *ger* simply mean “dwelling” (although *ger* itself retains a religious connotation). The Torah sometimes stresses that certain commandments apply to the *ezrach* and the *ger* alike (Lev. 16:29, 18:26, Num. 15:29, 15:30), both of whom live within the established community. In other cases, the Torah uses the terms *ger* and *toshav* to denote alien residents who ought to be pitied (Gen. 23:4, 25:35, 25:47). In the ensuing paragraphs we will discover the core roots of these Hebrew terms to help us trace their exact meanings and better sharpen our understanding of the differences between these apparent synonyms.

The Malbim explains that *ger* primarily refers to a person who lives in a land other than his original homeland—whether he is far away from his original hometown (Gen. 15:13, Ex. 18:3) or nearby (Judges 19:1, 19:16).

Similarly, Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (to Gen. 12:14, 23:4) notes that the biliteral root GIMMEL-REISH yields words with four distinct meanings: *ger*, *gur* (“lion cub”), *gur* (“fear”), *megurah* (“storage container”). Rabbi Hirsch finds the core meaning of this root to refer to “the detachment from one’s roots,” and that all four of these meanings relate back to a common theme. A *ger* is a sojourner who has settled elsewhere and

detached himself from his place of origin. *Gur* as a lion cub denotes a newly-weaned animal that is now *detached* from its mother and must fend for itself. Fear refers to the sense of being thrust into the unknown, as if the very ground on which one stood had been yanked out from underneath. And finally, *megurah* (or *megirah*, “closet/drawer” in Modern Hebrew) refers to a silo used for storing harvested grain that had already been *detached* from the ground. [See also Ibn Ezra (to Gen. 15:13, 23:4, Ps. 37:35) who also explains *ger* as an expression of “disconnection.”]

Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg (1785-1865) offers two etymological explanations of the word *ger*: First, he connects *ger* to the word *megirah/agurah* in the sense of “gathering.” This highlights the aspect of a *ger* in that he has now “gathered” himself into his newfound land and community. Second, Rabbi Mecklenburg connects *ger* to the word *girui* (“irritation” / “instigation”), and refers to the *ger*’s knack for “instigating” a fight against his natural desires and overcoming them.

Rabbinic Tradition understands that the word *ger* (or, more accurately, the infinitive verb *la’gur*) connotes living in a certain place under a temporary arrangement. This is seen from Gen. 47:4, wherein Joseph’s brothers use the word *la’gur* to tell Pharaoh that they have come to “live” in Egypt. The *Haggadah Shel Pesach* understands this terminology to imply that Jacob’s family came to Egypt only as a temporary measure, to avoid the famine that had been ravaging the Land of Canaan, but they never intended to permanently

settle in Egypt. Rabbi Shlomo Aharon Wertheimer (1866-1935) points out that Jacob uses similar verbiage (*garti*) to denote his living in Laban's house for fourteen years (Gen. 32:5), as Jacob never intended to stay there long-term but was forced to do so due to the circumstances.

The Hebrew *ger* is typically translated into Aramaic as *dayar* (see Targum Onkelos to Deut. 10:19 for a notable exception). This word has relatives in Biblical Aramaic (Ps. 84:11, Dan. 2:11 4:9 4:32 5:21), and is also a cognate of the later Mishnaic Hebrew words *madoor/dirah* (*Eruvin* 2:5, 5:1, *Ketuvot* 12:3, *Bava Batra* 1:5, *Avodah Zarah* 1:9), which refer to places of residence/domiciles. (See *Rashba Meyuchas L'Ramban* 257, which discusses whether a communal ban that forbids a person from establishing his *dirah* in a specific place also precludes him from opening a store there.)

As opposed to the *ger* who lives in a given place short-term, the *toshav* settles in a given place for the long haul. Rabbi David Kimchi (1160-1235), also known as Radak, in *Sefer HaShorashim* traces the root of *toshav* to the trilateral root YOD-SHIN-BET, which means "sitting" and "settling long-term." Menachem Ibn Saruk (920-970) traces the word *toshav* to the biliteral root SHIN-BET, which Rabbi Shlomo Pappenheim (1740-1814) explains primarily means "returning" / "reverting" to a previous place or status. *Yeshiva* denotes a permanent dwelling place, which obviates a sojourner's need to ever "return" elsewhere, and a *toshav* is a permanent resident who engages in *yeshiva*.

Rabbi Yisrael Yaakov Algazi (1680-1757) cites a fascinating responsum by Rabbi Shmuel Modiliano, who argues that *toshav/yeshiva* denotes settling in a place in which one owns/has rights to the real estate, while *gar/dirah* denotes living in a place where one simply has the right to live there but does not actually own the property on which his home stands. He cites multiple Biblical prooftexts to this effect.

When Abraham presented himself before the Hittites to buy property to bury Sarah, Abraham referred to himself as both a *ger* and a *toshav* (Gen. 23:4). Radak's brother, Rabbi Moshe Kimchi (1120-1190), explains that Abraham called himself a *ger* in the sense that he was an émigré from his

original homeland, but he also called himself a *toshav* in the sense that his family had settled the Land of Canaan and made it their new home, such that even if he were to die, his descendants would still remain there.

Rabbi Eliyahu HaBachur (1469-1549) writes that the word *ger* primarily refers to one who repudiates idolatry, and accepts upon him or herself to not engage in that vile practice. This may be derived from the understanding that a *ger* primarily refers to he who has disconnected himself from his homeland. From a halachic perspective, there are two such types of *gerim*: A *ger-toshav* is a gentile who simply rejects idolatry and is thus granted residency in the Holy Land (although some authorities require that he also accept the Seven Noahide Laws, see *Avodah Zarah* 64b and Nachmanides to Ex. 20:10), while a *ger-tzedek* ("proselyte") refers to a gentile who accepts upon himself the entire Torah and its commandments, thus converting to Judaism and joining the Jewish People (see *Yevamot* 48b, *Gittin* 57b, *Kiddushin* 20a, *Bava Kama* 113b, *Bava Metzia* 71a, 111b, *Sanhedrin* 96b, *Erachin* 30b).

Interestingly, the term *ger-toshav* never appears in the Bible. Rather, a person of this status is sometimes referred to as a *toshav* (Rashi to Ex. 12:45) and sometimes as a *ger* (Rashi to Ex. 23:12, Deut. 14:21). That said, when the Bible refers to "*ger v'toshav*" (Lev. 25:35), Mizrahi explains that this means a *ger-toshav*, and the letter *vav* should not be understood in the usual sense of "and."

Although Menachem Ibn Saruk designates the four letters that comprise the word *ezrach* as its own root, Ibn Janach and Radak understand that *ezrach* is derived from the trilateral root ZAYIN-REISH-CHET ("shining"). Radak (to Psalms 37:35 and *Sefer HaShorashim*) explains that *ezrach* relates to "shining," because just as when the light shines everything becomes visible and revealed, so is the *ezrach* somebody whose identity and family is out in the open and revealed to all. This contrasts with the *ger*, whose true identity and origins always remain a mystery.

According to the Talmud (*Bava Batra* 15a), Abraham contributed to the Book of Psalms under the pen-name Eitan the Ezechite. Targum (to Ps. 89:1) explains that Abraham was given the

appellation “Ezrachite” because he came from the “east” (*mizrach*). *Mizrach*, in turn, also derives from the same root ZAYIN-REISH-CHET because the sun rises in the morning from the east, from where it begins to “shine.”

Rabbi David Chaim Chelouche (1920-2016), the late Chief Rabbi of Netanya, takes this a step further, expanding on this idea to account for the use of the term *ezrach* as “citizen.” He explains that in ancient times the boundaries of civilization were broadly understood to be in the “east.” As such, a legitimate citizen who was properly oriented in society is likewise called an easterner, i.e. *ezrach*. On the flip side, one who leaves the confines of civilization and sojourns beyond the pale of settlement is branded a “stranger” or “occidental.” In Hebrew, this designation would be marked with the words *ger* or *zar*.

[Rabbi Chelouche attempts to prove this point by noting that in Arabic *maghreb* means “west” and *ghurayb* means “stranger,” assuming that both of these words are cognates of the Hebrew *ger*. However, from a linguistic perspective, this theory does not hold true, because the letter that represents the *gh*-sound in Arabic is actually related

to the Hebrew AYIN, such that *maghreb* cognates with the Hebrew *maarav* (“west”) and *erev* (“evening”), as opposed to *ger*.]

To capsize our discussion, Rabbi Wertheimer writes that *ger* is the opposite of *ezrach* and the opposite of *toshav*, as a *ger* denotes a sojourner who is neither a full-fledged citizen of this particular land (*ezrach*), nor is he an alien resident (*toshav*). He is simply living here as one stop in his greater journey.

Interestingly, the Radak’s father, Rabbi Yosef Kimchi (in *Sefer Zikaron*), and the Radak himself (to Yechezkel 25:7) note that the letters ZAYIN and GIMMEL can be interchangeable. While they do not specifically cite this example, we can apply their rule to the words *zar* and *ger* to understand some affinity between them – so just as *zar* means “stranger,” so does *ger*. Case in point: Rabbi Shmuel David Luzzatto (1800-1865), known as Shadal, named his commentary to the Pentateuch as *Ohev Ger* (“Lover of Strangers” in Hebrew), and similarly named his Philosseno (*philo* = “lover,” *xeno* = “stranger/alien” in Latin), thus also presuming a connection between *ger* and *zar*.

For questions, comments, or to propose ideas for a future article, please contact the author at rklein@ohr.edu

**Together with the rest of Klal Yisrael, we
mourn the lives lost in the horrific tragedy in
Meron, and we pray for those injured.**

**May Hashem have mercy on His children in
the merit of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai**

COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

TO BELIEVE IS TO BEHAVE (PART 5)

(LAILAH GIFTY AKITA)

“These are the precepts whose fruits a person enjoys in this world, but whose principal remains intact in the World to Come. They are: honoring one’s parents; acts of kindness; early arrival at the study hall in the morning and the evening; hosting guests; visiting the sick; providing the wherewithal for a bride to marry; escorting the dead; praying with concentration; making peace between two people; and Torah study is the equivalent of them all.” (Tractate Shabbat 127a)

The fourth mitzvah is hosting guests. There is an astonishing statement that appears twice in the Talmud (Tractates Shabbat 127a and Shavuot 35b), that having guests is even greater than being in the company of the Divine Presence. Our Sages learn this monumental lesson from the actions of our forefather Avraham. The Torah relates (in Genesis 18) how Avraham took temporary leave of the Divine Presence in order to serve three wayfarers who were passing by. The Midrash Tanchuma explains that hurrying away from the Divine Presence was not a disrespectful thing for Avraham to do, because by serving G-d’s creations he was actually serving G-d. Nevertheless, this statement of our Sages “that having guests is of greater importance than hosting the Divine Presence” requires additional clarification.

Rabbi Shmuel Bornstein (1855-1926), the second Rebbi of Sochatchov, whose multi-volume masterpiece on the Torah and Chassidic thought called *Shem Mishmuel* is still avidly studied today, writes that Avraham had never received such a sublime revelation before as he did now when he stood before the Divine Presence. And it was clear to him just how precious it was. In fact, it is impossible to imagine an otherworldly delight that might be greater than the one he was experiencing at that moment. And yet, in order to perform the mitzvah of hosting guests, Avraham immediately chose to disregard his own personal, infinite pleasure, in order to tend to the needs of three strangers. Why would he do such a thing? Because Avraham understood that the absolute purpose of

the trait of kindness is to ignore one’s own needs and to think of others.

Fascinatingly enough, our Sages mention a seemingly insignificant detail in Tractate Bava Metzia 86b. They teach that during the meal that he prepared for them, Avraham served his guests tongue cooked in mustard. Rabbi Avraham Pam (1913-2001), the beloved head of the Torah Vedaath Yeshivah in New York and one of the most influential Torah leaders in America in the previous century, asks an intriguing question. Avraham was a spiritual person whose entire being was dedicated to serving G-d. It was his entire *weltanschauung*. If so, why was there something as mundane as mustard in his spice cabinet? How could mustard possibly have enhanced Avraham’s connection to G-d? Rabbi Pam answers that the mustard was not for Avraham. Avraham was not interested in condiments. But Avraham was the host par excellence and he knew that his guests might very well enjoy mustard – and for that reason alone it was worthwhile having mustard on hand. Just in case.

Actually, so important is the mitzvah that our Sages teach (Tractate Sanhedrin 103b) that the reward earned for hosting guests and feeding the hungry is truly exceptional because G-d “turns a blind eye” to the person’s bad deeds. As Rashi explains, “G-d does not look at his sins. G-d ‘pretends’ not to see his actions.”

Rabbi Yehoshua Leib Diskin, one of the outstanding Torah luminaries of the nineteenth

century and who served as the Rabbi in some of the most prestigious communities in Eastern Europe and, at the end of his life, in Jerusalem, was known to excel in the mitzvah of hosting guests. Once, while he was seemingly completely engrossed in learning Torah, he suddenly put down the volume of Talmud that he was studying, and went over to one of his elderly guests in order to help him take the soft parts of the challah out of the crust. Being familiar with his legendary concentration for Torah thoughts, his students asked him how he could have realized that there was someone at the table who needed assistance

when he was so totally absorbed in his studies. In the quintessentially Jewish way, Rabbi Diskin answered with a question of his own. “When G-d was speaking with Avraham, how did Avraham realize that three guests had arrived?” Rabbi Diskin then answered his own question by telling them that when you are steadfast in the performance of a particular mitzvah, you can be speaking with G-d, or learning Torah, or completely involved in something else, but when the opportunity to do that mitzvah arrives – you will just know.

To be continued...

PARSHA OVERVIEW

Behar

The Torah prohibits normal farming of the Land of Israel every seven years. This “Shabbat for the land” is called “Shemitta.” After every seventh Shemitta, the fiftieth year, Yovel (“Jubilee”) is announced with the sound of the shofar on Yom Kippur. This was also a year for the land to lie fallow. G-d promises to provide a bumper crop prior to the Shemitta and Yovel years.

During Yovel, all land is returned to its original division from the time of Joshua, and all Jewish indentured servants are freed, even if they have not completed their six years of work. A Jewish indentured servant may not be given any demeaning, unnecessary or excessively difficult work, and may

not be sold in the public market. The price of his labor must be calculated according to the amount of time remaining until he will automatically become free. The price of land is similarly calculated.

Should anyone sell his ancestral land, he has the right to redeem it after two years. If a house in a walled city is sold, the right of redemption is limited to the first year after the sale. The Levites' cities belong to them forever. The Jewish People are forbidden to take advantage of one another by lending or borrowing with interest. Family members should redeem any relative who was sold as an indentured servant as a result of impoverishment.

Bechukotai

The Torah promises prosperity for the Jewish People if they follow G-d's commandments. However, if they fail to live up to the responsibility of this calling, then chilling punishments will result. The Torah details the harsh historical process that will fall upon them when Divine protection is removed.

These punishments, whose purpose is to bring the Jewish People to repent, will be in seven stages, each more severe than the last. Sefer Vayikra, the Book of Leviticus, concludes with the details of *erachin* – the process by which someone vows to give the Beit Hamikdash the equivalent monetary value of a person, an animal or a property.

LETTER AND SPIRIT

Insights based on the writings of Rav S.R. Hirsch by Rabbi Yosef Herschman

Bechukotai

Defectors' Descent

This Torah portion contains one of two mournful rebukes in the Torah, foretelling and warning us of our eventual defection and its consequences. It is read in a low tone to reflect its solemn content. There are several phrases describing the nation's various levels of descent – a process which is elaborated on by our Sages, and which Rav Hirsch witnessed acutely in his lifetime.

If you will not hearken to Me, and will not observe all these commandments... The first misstep refers to a failure to listen to the Word of G-d. Forsaking the Law in practice begins with neglecting the study and knowledge of Torah – one who does not study will disobey in practice.

And if you will despise My statutes. One who has lost the theoretical knowledge and understanding of the commandments and has ceased to observe them will be bothered by his conscience. In order to justify his behavior to himself, he will rationalize his disobedience as progress. He will accustom himself to look down on the observance of the mitzvahs and to dismiss them as antiquated. The defector remains keenly aware of the Torah's presence and power in the lives of his contemporaries, and the faithfulness of those adherents are an indictment of him. In order to neutralize the impact of that indictment, he convinces himself that he is superior to the others and holds their adherence in contempt.

And if your soul will abhor My social ordinances... The process of defection continues. Unable to accept that others' faithfulness to Torah is the product of their own inner conviction and devotion, the defector then seeks a superficial explanation for their observance. Hence, the next attack is on Jewish communal institutions and life. These are the institutions that have promoted Torah and its study and are therefore despised by the defectors. They particularly despise the leaders and view them as the misfortune of their race.

So that all of My commandments will not be observed. The defector does not stop at his own estrangement and contempt for others who observe and lead. Rather, defectors become fanatically intolerant at every opportunity. What *they* do not respect must not be respected by anyone else. What *they* do not observe must not be observed by others either. They declare war on the Torah, and obstruct its observance wherever and in whatever way they can. They convince themselves that they are acting for the good of mankind, and that their fight against the Torah is not a fight against G-d, but rather the fight against a dangerous myth of Revelation, against prophets who were imposters, and all of the duped deceivers who contributed to the fallacy of transmission. They will not stand for *anyone* observing the mitzvahs, and will justify their position by rejecting the Sinaitic origin of the Law.

So that you will break My covenant. There is yet one more level of descent. Even as they have failed to study and practice, have despised the Torah's adherents and leaders, and attempt to block all fulfillment of mitzvahs, they have yet to break the last thread that binds them to G-d's Covenant. The final step is the denial of G-d's existence. For as long as the thought of G-d is in their mind, as long as they contemplate G-d's existence – even with wavering doubt – they will consider the possibility of G-d's Revelation, and the voice of their conscience will give them no rest. Only when this last light within is extinguished, will they find rest. And so, in their quest for peace of mind, they will stamp out this last spark and deny the existence of G-d.

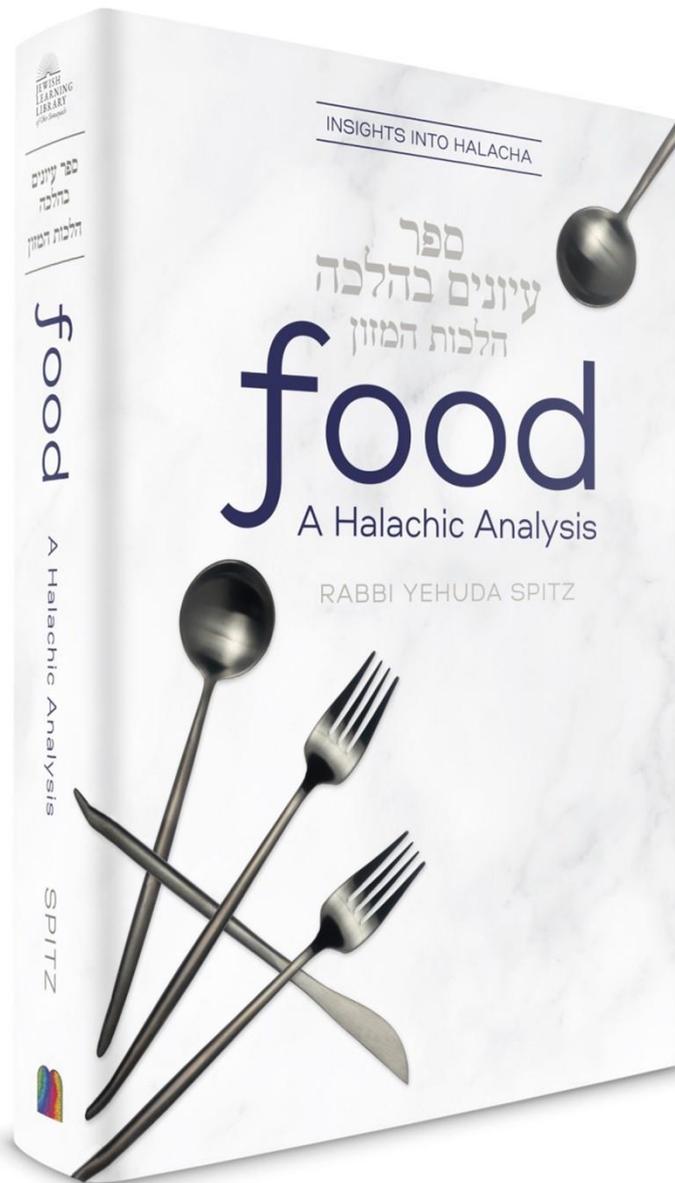
But even then, G-d does not lose hope. He shapes history in ways that bring about introspection and will require actions and forbearance amounting to the antithesis of those sins to bring the furthest of defectors back.

- Sources: Commentary, Vayikra 26:14-15, 39-43

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